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MONTANA Environmental Conversation

A Newsletter of the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation • Director Bud Clinch

Summer 2001

HOW DRY IS IT?

Montanans continue to cope as best they can with drought conditions that rival those in some of the most extreme drought years on record. In many parts of the state, cumulative shortfalls of precipitation dating to fall of 1997 have come home to roost. Carbon, Stillwater, Teton, Chouteau, Pondera, Toole, Liberty, Glacier, Cascade, Judith Basin, Fergus, Petroleum, Garfield, Musselshell, and a number of other Montana counties can easily trace today's drought impacts back three to four years. According to the National Weather Service, Montana entered 2001 with precipitation deficits at selected locations ranging from about three to seven inches of moisture. Even the state's reservoirs, usually able to cushion the setbacks, are getting very low in many places and are expected to continue to decline.

Undoubtedly, the moisture received in June brought some relief for livestock operators, fisheries, forests, and some grain producers. The new green cast to the hills and prairies raised spirits from Wyoming to Canada, but appearances can be deceiving. In some areas, hot, windy conditions followed on the heels of the storms, taking back much of the precious moisture. According to the Montana Agricultural Statistics Service Crop Weather Report for the week ending July 6, 2001, "Crop conditions have improved little as a result of mid-June rains. Strong winds and dry weather seemed to have caused the most woes last week, especially in north-central Montana."

The July 9 Crop Weather Report stated that, although parts of the state received almost an inch of moisture over the preceding week, "The north-central part of the state really took a beating, as its drought-stressed fields were subjected to a week of high temperatures in the mid-90's. Irrigated crops are generally in good shape; that is, if producers have access to water. Cattle are doing good throughout most of the state, but pastures are starting to decline again. More moisture needs to hit the ground and temperatures need to decline before rangeland gets healthy again."

According to the National Weather Service, June was above average statewide for precipitation. For the period of October 1, 2000, through June 30, 2001, preliminary figures show the northeast leads the state divisions with 121 percent of average, followed by the southeast at 103 percent, southwest at 92 percent, cen-

How Dry. . . *continued on page 3*

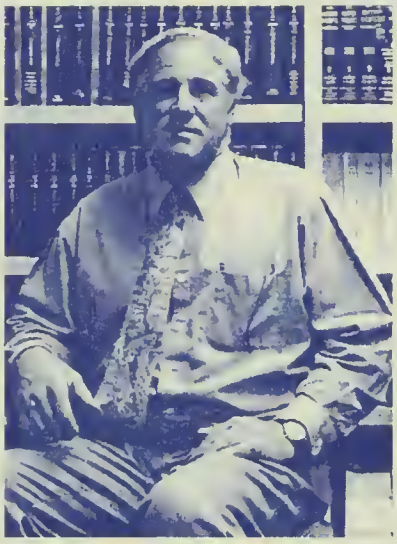
PHOTO BY KARL CHRISTIANS

Bynum Reservoir

"To help ensure Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations."

—A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR—

It has been some time since I had the opportunity to speak to all of you via a newsletter. However, the folks in the Information Technology Bureau and I felt there was a void that needed to be filled. Our hope is that this newsletter will be a means to convey information about department-wide activities, as we are a large and diverse agency. If you have suggestions or comments, please feel free to pass those on to Bob Auer and his crew, and they will attempt to incorporate them.



Director Bud Clinch

This past fiscal year was filled with numerous issues that had impacts upon our department. As there is a limitation of space, I would like to take this opportunity to just touch on a few umbrella issues that affect DNRC.

Legislative Session

This past session was not much different from any of the other recent sessions. The legislature was conservative in allocating general fund (tax dollars), supportive of natural resource development, pro-business, and anti-tax. These characteristics, combined with the effects of term limits, led to many protracted discussions on any issues associated with these topics. However, in spite of what might be viewed as a loggerhead legislature, the department was quite successful with our package of bills. This, in part, is because our initiatives were well thought out and reflective of generally agreed-upon law changes. While I personally did most of the testimony on behalf of the department, my strength comes from the excellent support I receive from those of you with specific knowledge on the issues. Collectively, "we" did well.

Budget

Reflective of the conservative majority, the appropriations process is one that demanded a great deal of persuasion and justification. While allocation of new general fund dollars was tight, the department fared quite well in receiving its "base" budget as well as substantial new federal dollars, state special revenue funds, and some limited new general fund. These allocations were very specific and reflective of the individual programs and funding sources. What became evident to me is a general, emerging philosophy that "new" dollars are scarce today and probably tomorrow. Funding for new programs will probably have to come from prioritization of existing programs and elimination of outdated programs. I predict this to be a theme that guides us in our next budget preparation. Our reputation as an efficient, effective, and productive organization serves us well during these years of conservative budgeting philosophy.

New Administration and Land Board

I'm confident that the new executive branch, similar to the past administration, will be very supportive of the many natural resource programs that DNRC implements. While there is a substantial learning curve in bringing various staff up to speed, the overall support is there. This is not to say that we won't have thorny issues to work through together. As in the past, our thorough analysis, evaluation, and recommendations will probably carry the day.

This is also true of land board issues. Since this is the first time that all five of the land board members are new concurrently, there is substantial work to be done in establishing familiarity with the issues as well as DNRC'S credibility. While this seems like a daunting task, it is not much different from what we struggled with eight years ago. As a crusty old logger once told me, "The easy? — Well, anybody can do it. The difficult? — Well, it will take some effort. The impossible? — It just takes a little longer." Quite honestly, that statement sums up what I've observed in terms of work ethic and commitment among DNRC employees.

The new fiscal year is now ahead of us, with its challenges and struggles. As we enter into the year, let us not forget to look back at our accomplishments, learn from our mistakes, and look at new challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles. DNRC is looked upon, by both the public and other state agencies, as a department of innovative thinking and proactive accomplishments. It has been an honor to serve with you over the last eight years, and I am looking forward to the next four.

—Bud Clinch, Director

How Dry. . . *continued from page 1*

tral at 85 percent, south central at 80 percent, and the western division at 82 percent of average moisture.

The long-term drought effects are manifested in declining groundwater levels, weak base streamflows, stressed range forage, failed winter wheat crops, precarious moisture levels in forest fuels, and shortages of surface water for livestock, irrigation, and fisheries. These are the most visible signs and impacts of the continuing drought. The untold story is the shock wave emanating from the small towns and communities where agriculture is the mainstay of life.

Mounting debt, record-low prices for grain, the occasional hailstorm, town water supply problems, insect damage, and long, hot, and windy days—all are taking a human toll, as well. In some cases, fourth-generation farmers and ranchers shudder at the thought of losing the family operation. Small businesses owned by the same families for generations struggle to turn a profit or even to remain solvent. And the small-town bankers continue to work to extend credit and hold the whole system together, lest it come apart.

Drought is very frustrating for those who live on the land because they feel helpless to take meaningful action. In most cases, people are left to stand by and witness the accrual of further damage. In a desperate and collective initiative, farmers have pooled precious savings to engage the services of "rainmakers" (*Helena Independent Record*, June 11, 2001, Montana Section). Some wonder why others would sacrifice their precious dollars in this way; in the eyes of others, "At least they are *trying* to do *something* about the drought." Indeed, these are desperate times in rural Montana.

For many, the moisture has been "too little and too late." In places like Toole and Liberty Counties, crop insurance adjusters have been busy making final appraisals of the ruined wheat crops. "It's all over for a lot of our people up here," according to Toole County Commissioner Tom Gordon, who attended the June 14 meeting of the Drought Advisory Committee to impress upon the committee the severity of the drought and to present the North Central Montana Soil Environment (Moisture) Monitoring Initiative. Many agricultural producers feel the USDA, using only a few precipitation figures for each county, does not get a sufficient or accurate assessment of moisture conditions. Precipitation, as expressed in percentages of average, determines whether producers in a given county are eligible for drought relief assistance.

Over 377,000 of Montana's cattle have been moved out-of-state or have been sold earlier than usual, according to the Montana Department of Livestock. In some cases, June's moisture bought some time for livestock producers. The opening of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands in over 30 counties has provided some relief forage for grazing livestock.

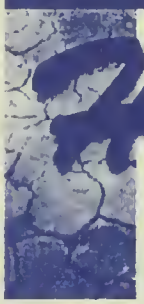
The Drought Advisory Committee, with the help of Montana's Congressional delegation and the Montana Office of the USDA Farm Service Agency, is now pressing for opening CRP lands for haying. Much CRP land is without fencing and water, and the nutritional value of the forage there will decline as time goes on. Approval of haying CRP lands must take into account the nesting and rearing habitat of wildfowl, for which, in part, the program was established, and the potential for loss of life during cutting.

The Drought Advisory Committee had assigned a "Drought Alert" status to all 56 counties in early April. The committee upgraded 41 counties to its "Severe Drought" status on May 18 and the remaining 15 counties two weeks later. On May 30, Governor Judy Martz was successful in her efforts to receive an extension of last year's statewide Natural Disaster Determination (NDD) for Year 2001 from U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman. The determination opens some low-interest loan programs and some Internal Revenue Service tax relief to qualified farmers and ranchers.

For now, we are forced to brace and hope for the best. Monsoon moisture is tracking north as this article is being written, and the state should benefit as long as the pattern holds. Temperatures of 85 instead of 95 degrees, cloud cover, decreasing daylight hours, water conservation, and, of course, more moisture will be needed to get us through the next two months.

The Montana Drought Advisory Committee is chaired by Lt. Governor Karl Ohs and staffed by Jesse Aber and Bob Smith of DNRC's Water Resources Division. Its next meeting will be held on September 20, 2001, at 9:30 a.m. in the Director's Conference Room of the Lee Metcalf (DEQ) Building. The committee's Drought 2001 Internet web site is:
http://nris.state.mt.us/Drought

—DROUGHT-RELATED FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE—



How does the Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD) know it's a drought year? By the number of phone calls in the last several months requesting funding assistance for drought-related conditions and emergencies.

CARDD administers a number of loan and grant programs. Two of these—the Rangeland Improvement Loan Program and the Renewable Resource Grant and Loan Program—are especially applicable to current drought conditions.

Rangeland Improvement Loans

Under this program, which was started in 1979, an application is initially taken at the local conservation district, where it is reviewed along with the conservation plan. DNRC then reviews the loan and forwards it to the Rangeland Resource Executive Committee. In the last four months, nine applications have requested a total of $284,000 to install stockwater projects. Generally, these projects involve buried pipelines from a water source to various stock tanks on an individual's ranch. Many of these projects are being implemented because stockwater reservoirs have dried up in the eastern portion of the state.

Renewable Resource Grant and Loan Program

For most projects under the Renewable Resource Grant and Loan Program (RRGLP), the legislature makes the funding decision. However, DNRC has authority to approve certain grants and loans to private individuals and organizations, as well as emergency grants and loans to state and local government agencies including counties, incorporated cities and towns, conservation districts, irrigation districts, and water and sewer districts. Information about these types of financial assistance is summarized in Table 1.

Project Planning Grants. Although these grants would not be useful for immediate drought problems, they can be crucial to the planning efforts of communities and other public entities for projects that will mitigate the effects of drought in the future. These grants fund preliminary technical studies for renewable resource projects that conserve, manage, develop, or protect renewable resources. Applications are accepted on an open-cycle basis beginning June 1, 2001. Applications that satisfy project and applicant criteria are funded on a first-come, first-served basis until all available grant funds are committed.

Private Grants. Most of the funds are targeted to assist small, privately owned water systems. Water measurement projects may be funded in chronically low water basins.

Private Loans. Real property must be given as security for loans to private individuals for water development projects. Loans to private organizations are secured by the revenue produced by the system. Irrigation system improvements are the most common type of project funded. Since January 2001, there have been approximately 70 loan applications approved and financed by the sale of over $6 million in bonds.

Emergency Grants. The emergency must pose an immediate threat to the beneficial management of a renewable resource, and all reasonable funding sources must be investigated before an emergency grant will be awarded. Two projects directly related to the drought have been funded. Conrad received a $30,000 grant to dredge a channel from the deep pool in Lake Francis about one mile to the dam. The channel provided passage for water from the middle of the lake to the inlet for the community's water supply. Geraldine received a $19,000 grant to increase the capacity of its spring water collection gallery on Square Butte, about 10 miles south of the north-central Montana community.

Emergency Loans. The financial guidelines and security provisions normally required for the issuance of general obligation or revenue bonds apply. Interest rates vary with the coal severance bond rate and may be adjusted by the legislature. These funds may never have to be used, but they do provide a safety net for those situations that are unavoidable.

Other Sources of Assistance

Two other state agencies—the Governor's Office and the Treasure State Endowment Program in the Department of Commerce—also fund emergencies. Funding assistance is available from the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for projects that improve streamflow and enhance fisheries. Three federal agencies—the Farm Service Agency, the Small Business Association, and the Bureau of Reclamation—are also able to provide drought-related financial assistance. Explanations of these programs can be found at:

http://nris.state.mt.us/Drought

TABLE 1
DROUGHT-RELATED FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE FROM CARDD

PROGRAM	PROGRAM FUNDING		ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS	PROVISIONS			CONTACT
	Amount	Source		Maximum Amount	Interest Rate	Terms	
Rangeland Improvement Loans	$500,000 revolving account	Legislative appropriation	Farmers, ranchers, private landowners	$50,000	3%	10 years	Larry Bloxsom 406-444-6686
Project Planning Grants (RRGLP)	$300,000 for this biennium	Legislative appropriation	Communities, public entities	$10,000	NA	50% match	Pam Smith 406-444-6839
Private Grants (RRGLP)	$100,000 per biennium	Legislative appropriation	Individuals, associations, partnerships, corporations (for-profit and nonprofit)	Lesser of $5,000 or 25% of project cost	NA	None	Larry Bloxsom 406-444-6686
Private Loans (RRGLP)	Up to $20 million (outstanding bond balance)	Bond sales	Individuals	Lesser of $200,000 or 80% of fair market value of real property	Varies	Up to 15 years	Larry Bloxsom 406-444-6686
			Organizations such as ditch companies and water user associations	$300,000	Varies	Up to 15 years	Larry Bloxsom 406-444-6686
Emergency Grants (RRGLP)	$125,000 per biennium	Legislative appropriation	State and local government agencies; CDs; irrigation, water, and sewer districts	$30,000	NA	None	Bob Fischer 406-444-6688
Emergency Loans (RRGLP)	Up to $10 million (outstanding bond balance)	Bond sales	State and local government agencies; CDs; irrigation, water, and sewer districts	Limited by applicant's bonded debt capacity	Varies	Varies; usually 20 years	Bob Fischer 406-444-6688

—FORESTRY MERIT AWARDS—

On June 26, Forestry Division Administrator Don Artley presented Certificates of Appreciation to Bev Tolker, Rob Ethridge, and Debbie Wagner of the Service Forestry Bureau and to all employees of the Fire and Aviation Management Bureau for their collective effort in responding to the challenges of the year 2000 fire season.

For the Administrator's Award, a group award was given to all seasonal employees in the fire program for outstanding performance under extremely difficult and dangerous fire conditions last summer.

Steve Puyear (Anaconda Unit), Christy Weselius (Kalispell/Plains Unit), and Howard Kent (Clearwater Unit) have received the Excellence in Firefighting Award, signed by the governor.

—DNRC PUBLIC SERVICE AWARDS—

Many DNRC employees are being honored for their years of service to the public and receiving lapel pins in recognition.

Forestry Division Administrator Don Artley (left) congratulates Jack Peters (right), as Tony Liane looks on.

30 Years

Rick Bondy and Rick Burger, both of Helena; Jack Peters, Missoula; and Gary Hadlock, Kalispell.

25 Years

Don Artley, Duane Erickson, and Mark Lennon, all of Missoula; Robert Vlahovich, Patti Miller, Rich Moy, Wayne Wetzel, Al Christianson, and Brenda Elwell, all of Helena; Mary Ellen Wolfe, Bozeman; and Keith Kerbel, Billings.

20 Years

Tom Richmond, Rich Jacobson, Darrell Kurk, and Pat Riley, all of Billings; Jim Beck, Regina Fullerton, Nancy Hughes, John Sanders, Cindy Forgey, and Lori Gustin, all of Helena; Tad Kolwicz, Eric Norris, Jeanne Fairbanks, Jane Markland, and John Pilsworth, all of Missoula; Jim Wallace and Greg Poncin, both of Kalispell; Margaret Beck and Rick Komenda, both of Olney; Dixie Brough and Marvin Cross, both of Havre; Colin Moon, Greenough; Paul Moore, Hamilton; Doug Turman, Libby; and Sharon Moore, Miles City.

15 Years

Mike Kopitzke, Janie Kurth, Rob Ethridge, and Will Wood, all of Missoula; Larry Bloxsom, Tim Kuehn, Kris Hardman, and Terri Perrigo, all of Helena; Jerry Buhre, Lewistown; Ed Skarda, Billings; Raymond Lundby, Miles City; and Dan Cassidy, Kalispell.

10 Years

Linda Stangland, Dave Amman, Terry Voeller, Rob Kingery, Susan Russell, Jesse Aber, Barbara Cosens, Joan Specking, Lisa Axline, and Melvin Kroll, all of Helena; Dave Adair and Jan Wheeler, both of Billings; Ray Boyer, Sean Gallagher, and Richard Rose, all of Missoula; Mike Meyer, Anaconda; Bill Baumgartner, Lewistown; Glenda Rothacker, Kalispell; and Rick Morrill, Libby.

5 Years

Steve Bailey, Dave Poukish, Terry Thorpe, and Mike Conner, all of Kalispell; Kevin Smith, Dan Olson, and Patrick Smith, all of Helena; Rich Stocker, Sherry White, Beverly Ragsdale-Aguirre, and John Justin, all of Missoula; Chris Pileski, Miles City; Steve Puyear, Anaconda; Erik Eneboe, Conrad; Hoyt Richards, Glasgow; and Sheri Dorothy, Plains.

—RETIREMENTS—

Area Manager Don Kendall

After 31 years with the department, Don Kendall, area manager of DNRC's Southern Land Office in Billings, retired on July 6, 2001. Don began working as a forester in July 1970 and soon rose to the rank of supervisor of the Billings office in 1974.

His time with DNRC is marked with numerous letters of thanks for wonderful service. In one such letter, co-workers state, "Don was very impressive in that he did not just sit back and give directions on how the job should be completed; rather, he worked side by side with the rest of the crew throughout this period doing anything necessary to complete the job." In another letter, the Yellowstone County Board of Commissioners noted, "We hereby express our sincere appreciation for exemplary work on the Emerald Hills fire of April 12, 2000."

We, along with so many others, wish to say thanks for 31 years of positive and professional service to the State of Montana.

PHOTO BY BARBARA KENDALL

Don Kendall, SLO Area Manager

Wayne Wetzel,
Special Projects Coordinator

Special Projects Coordinator Wayne Wetzel

Helena employees gathered on July 26, 2001, to wish Special Projects Coordinator Wayne Wetzel well. Wayne took an early retirement after 25 years of commendable service to the state.

Wayne began his employment as the department's environmental coordinator within the Director's Special Staff Unit. Subsequent positions included Technical Services Section supervisor in the Water Resources Division, Facility Siting Bureau chief in the Energy Division, and DNRC deputy director. One momentous project handled by Wayne was overseeing the installation of generating capacity in DNRC's Broadwater-Missouri Dam at Toston. Recently he has been occupied with arranging the exchange of numerous parcels of state-owned land within the boundaries of the Crow Reservation for land of equal value outside the reservation.

Wayne has made an impressive contribution, and he will be missed.

—DNRC IN THE NEWS—

In our efforts to be proactive in informing the public, the media, and other local, state, and federal agencies, we prepare and distribute several news releases each week. The articles cover all facets of DNRC programs, activities, projects, and plans statewide. Examples of recurrent topics include awards of loans and grants and public use of and access to state-owned land. Recent releases have announced water commissioner training sessions, advisory council meetings, and youth camps. You can access these articles via the DNRC website under the "News/Events" button or at:

http://www.dnrc.state.mt.us/news.html

If you have an upcoming DNRC project or activity that might need media exposure, marketing, or public relations assistance, contact Dan Bushnell, DNRC public information officer.

—DROUGHT INDICATORS—

Information in this article was adapted from the Montana Drought Response Plan

The two primary indices used as indicators of drought are the Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) and the Surface Water Supply Index (SWSI). The PDSI is a soil moisture index based on measured precipitation, estimated evaporation and evapotranspiration, and climatic characteristics. The SWSI, which is used to project streamflow, is based on snowpack, mountain precipitation, soil moisture, and reservoir storage. Other indicators considered by decision makers include:

- Precipitation since prior month's end
- Snow water equivalent of remaining snowpack
- Current and projected reservoir storage levels
- Current streamflows
- Current soil moisture levels
- Short-range weather forecasts
- Fuel moisture level of forests
- Rate and nature of change in any of these factors
- Reports of livestock producers hauling water
- Agency personnel field observations
- Reports from the public

MONTANA DNRConversation

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675 copies of this document were published at an estimated cost of $.44 per copy. The total cost of $302 includes $297 for printing and $5 for distribution.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
1625 Eleventh Avenue
P.O. Box 201601
Helena, MT 59620-1601